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Presbyterian Creeds

Supplement on  
A Brief Statement of Faith

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# Presbyterian Creeds

## A Guide to The Book of Confessions

Supplement on  
A Brief Statement of Faith:  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Jack Rogers

Westminster/John Knox Press  
Louisville, Kentucky

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## A Brief Statement of Faith: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

In 1983, the two largest streams of Presbyterianism in the United States of America reunited. They overcame the shame of being divided for more than one hundred years. The Reunion Committee, at one time during its fourteen years of negotiation, had hoped to produce a creedal statement as a basis of reunion. Unable to accomplish that, they inserted into the new *Book of Order*, in the Form of Government, four preliminary chapters which gave the theological principles on which church government was predicated. Chapter II, "The Church and Its Confessions," summarized the function of confessions and gave examples of the doctrines contained in *The Book of Confessions* that made the church catholic, Protestant, and Reformed.

The Articles of Agreement governing the reunion mandated, and the reuniting General Assembly instructed its Moderator, Dr. J. Randolph Taylor, to appoint, a committee "representing diversities of points of view and groups within the reunited Church to prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith for possible inclusion in the *Book of Confessions*" (*Book of Order*, 3.3). It may be the first time in the history of Reformed creedal formation that a group was chosen specifically for its diversity and then expected to write a document evoking unity. Taylor appointed twenty-one people who did represent the diversity in the church. There were women and men,

racial ethnic persons and Anglos, members, elders, and ministers, and a range of ages, representing many points of view across a broad theological spectrum.

A lengthy and complex process finally led, after six years, to a draft approved by the 1990 General Assembly that was sent to the presbyteries for their vote. It took four years for the Special Committee to Prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith to agree on an initial draft. Remarkably, that agreement was unanimous. The committee then chose, in February 1988, to submit its draft to the church for comment. Fifteen thousand reply forms were returned, along with 1,760 extended comments from individuals and groups. The committee laboriously analyzed the responses and made amendments in light of them. In 1989, they submitted a revised draft to the General Assembly. Then a constitutional process began. Approval by the 1989 General Assembly was followed by Moderator Joan SalmonCampbell's appointment of a Committee of Fifteen to Consider the Report and the Recommendations of the Special Committee with power to revise the document. After four months of work, and concurrence of the original drafting committee, the Committee of Fifteen submitted a draft to the 1990 General Assembly. After detailed consideration, a standing committee of the Assembly passed the document unchanged to the floor of the Assembly, where it passed, unamended, with a 94 percent favorable vote. It then was sent to the presbyteries. It required an affirmative vote of two thirds of the presbyteries and the approval of the 1991 General Assembly to be included as the eleventh document in *The Book of Confessions*.

Members of the original drafting committee had spent their first year attempting to discern what issue or issues demanded a theological response. After identifying hundreds of items, they concluded that the primary need to be addressed was the Presbyterian Church's lack of theological identity. Years of commitment to pluralism, while

achieving valuable ends, had resulted in a loss of historical and theological memory. Accordingly, the drafting committee set out to produce a statement of faith, brief enough to be used regularly in worship, which would restate the basics of the universal Christian faith in its Protestant and Reformed expression.

"A Brief Statement of Faith: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.);" in two pages confessed the faith of the church catholic, Protestant, and Reformed. Without conscious intent, the committees, drafting and revising, had developed a document that contained the elements mentioned in Chapter II of the Form of Government, in *The Book of Order*, along with other traditional emphases. Additionally, A Brief Statement extended the Reformed tradition into new areas not previously articulated in *The Book of Confessions*. It provided a narrative of Jesus Christ's life and ministry, generally omitted from previous creeds. It unequivocally announced that God "makes everyone equally in God's image." For the first time, women were specifically declared equal to men and called to all of the ministries of the church. And, as no previous confessional document had done, it derived feminine as well as masculine images from Scripture to illustrate the love and faithfulness of God. Other nuances showed evidence of sensitivity to the concerns of women and racial ethnic persons. While the committees had concentrated on faithfully affirming the Reformed tradition, they had also faithfully applied it in new ways to the understanding of Scripture given by the Holy Spirit in their time.

### **Historical Context: The Case of "A Brief Statement of Faith: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)"**

Bright sunshine bathed the Salt Palace convention center in Salt Lake City, Utah. On one side, the imposing buildings of Temple Square reminded all of the dominating position of the Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints in this city and state. A few blocks on the other side, a small, Japanese-American Presbyterian church stood low on the horizon, framed against majestic mountains in the distance. It represented the tiny but hardy community of Presbyterians, all of whom, Anglo or ethnic, felt themselves to be minority persons in this culture.

Inside the convention center, the 202nd General Assembly (1990) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was in its eighth day. The time was 9:20 A.M. on Tuesday, June 5. The Moderator of the General Assembly, elder Price Gwynn III, called for the Order of the Day, the report of the Assembly Committee on a Brief Statement of Faith. Elder Edith Benzinger of the Presbytery of Pittsburgh came to the podium. She thought of the long day, the preceding Thursday, when the forty-five members assigned to her committee had resolutely and responsibly worked through A Brief Statement. They had consulted with members of the original Special Committee to Prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith and the revision Committee of Fifteen. They had made innumerable motions to amend, but none had gained a majority. Now the Assembly had the right to make any amendments for change that it pleased. Any one of the over five hundred commissioners could propose an amendment. After six years of work and the unanimous support of two special committees, the written responses of nearly seventeen thousand Presbyterians, and review and approval by committees of two General Assemblies, might this carefully wrought document be altered without further chance for reflection before it went to the presbyteries for their vote? She took a deep breath. The Presbyterian process had worked this far. Few had believed that committees so diverse in a pluralistic church could offer a two-page creed that seemed to gather support continually. It appeared to be a manifestation of the grace of God and a sign of hope that the Presby-



terian Church was regaining its identity. She began to speak: "We spent many hours taking A Brief Statement of Faith apart, word by word, part by part. . . ."

### *The Collapse of a Consensus*

Soon after the Confession of 1967 was adopted, rapid changes in the culture and in theology eroded the neo-orthodox theological consensus that it embodied. No one theological position was recognized as normative. The Confession of 1967 had courageously identified social issues that needed to be addressed. Then, in the late 1960s, theology itself became issue oriented. Black theology, political theology, theology of revolution, ecological theology, and theology of hope all presented new methods for approaching societal issues. Soon, liberation theology from Latin America offered an option of doing theology "from below," based in the experience of oppressed people. In a very different context, some faculty, especially in the university-related divinity schools, were attracted to process theology, a highly intellectual system that proposed to found theology in self-evident human experience and scientific fact. Less well known, but still influential, was narrative theology that drew on literary and psychological archetypes for theological models. Potentially the most revolutionary was feminist theology, which came in many forms, often allied with other theological models. In every case, however, it challenged the supremacy of patriarchal language and thought forms that other theologies had taken for granted.

In the face of the struggle for racial integration and, later, conflict over America's involvement in the war in Vietnam, church leaders became very critical of indirect persuasion and shifted to direct, protesting action. Denominational distinctions seemed insignificant in the face of world issues. Denominational leaders became

fervently ecumenical. Distinctively Presbyterian church school curriculum, high school groups, and college campus ministries were abandoned in favor of collaborative, ecumenical approaches. Within the denominations, groups formed around single issues and spent their energies and funds seeking support for their particular agendas. These groups frequently could be classified into one of two large groupings: those who favored emphasis on personal piety, and those who espoused greater efforts in social action.

In the mid-1970s, the media gave much attention to evangelicals, who numbered approximately forty million in America, and were present in all the major denominations as well as in smaller churches. Then, in the early 1980s, media coverage switched to the more conservative religious/political New Right. Jerry Falwell's fundamentalist followers claimed to have helped elect Ronald Reagan president. Pentecostal and charismatic Christians rallied behind the subsequent candidacy of Pat Robertson. Mainline denominations, including the Presbyterians, did not regain the public's attention until massive research began to document their precipitous decline in membership. Between 1965 and 1985, Presbyterians lost 25 percent of their members. This loss in size was accompanied by increasing financial strains and an awareness of diminishing public influence. Religion became very individualistic for most Americans. Those who attended church had little denominational awareness or loyalty. Approximately 60 percent of all those who joined Presbyterian churches had not been Presbyterian before joining that particular congregation. Presbyterians often were identified only by distancing themselves from the more vocal conservative groups.

One exception to the strong trend away from theological particularity came in the mid-1970s for Presbyterians. A young applicant for ordination argued that he could be a loyal Presbyterian without participating in the ordination

of women because that was a "nonessential point in Presbyterianism." This matter, called the Kenyon case, was tried in the church courts over a period of two years. Finally, the Permanent Judicial Commission of The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. ruled that Walter Wynn Kenyon could not be ordained if he would not ordain women. The decision stated: "The question of the importance of our belief in the equality of all people before God is thus essential to the disposition in this case." The commission argued from Scripture and the church's confessions for the equality of women as an essential point of Presbyterian belief. For the first time since the decision of 1927, which decentralized theological decision making to the presbyteries, Presbyterians were pondering their need as a national body to identify some beliefs as essentials.

### *Convening the Drafting Committee*

Late winter snow was still clinging in patches to the lawn outside the window of Jack Stotts's Chicago office. He stared out, as he hung up the telephone. He had just accepted Moderator Taylor's invitation to chair the Special Committee to Prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith. Now he felt overwhelmed by the wrong-headedness of such an enterprise. Did not such august documents simply rise up spontaneously from the life of the church? Surely human beings did not just sit down and decide to write a new creed. How could a contemporary committee come up with something to match the venerable Westminster Confession of Faith, or the courageous Theological Declaration of Barmen, or the pioneering Confession of 1967? Slowly, as he reflected, the reality began to dawn on him. The mandate was not to write something to match the other confessions. The contemporary task was to articulate the common faith of a particular tribe of Christians called Presbyterians, who

lived in the United States of America in the last decade of the twentieth century. History would decide how this document measured up to other historic confessional declarations.

On May 24, 1984, twenty people sat around a table in the Holiday Inn at O'Hare Field in Chicago. As Stotts looked at them, he realized that few knew each other. He assumed that they were pinning on one another invisible name tags: evangelical or liberal; pastor or layperson; professor or poet; cautious or cantankerous. They certainly did represent the diversity in the church: women and men; racial ethnic persons and Anglos; members, elders, and ministers. One member, with a severe disability, had died after being appointed and was later replaced, bringing the constant membership of the committee to twenty-one.

Almost immediately, questions were raised from within the committee: Where were the taxi drivers and farmers, the sales representatives and homemakers? Fourteen of the original twenty-one were professors. Six others were ministers. Only one was neither a faculty member nor a minister, and she was a published poet.

Moderator Taylor had come to charge the committee. He responded unflinchingly to the questions. The task of this group was to help the church recapture and reassert its identity as the people of God. That meant that people needed to be reintroduced to their own Reformed family heritage. He had therefore appointed people who knew that tradition. Their task was to put the tradition in language that all the members of the church could understand. The church needed to be challenged to creative theological discussion. It had to be helped to focus on essentials. It needed to be called again to the meaning of being a confessional church. Stotts wondered if this diverse group would be able to fulfill the awesome mandate to shape a confessional unity for the Presbyterian Church.

### ***Defining a Direction***

The Special Committee met in late November 1984, at a retreat center near Cincinnati. Stotts introduced the chairs of the most recent predecessor committees that had drafted contemporary confessions of faith. Edward A. Dowey, Jr., of the Confession of 1967 committee in the former United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA), and Albert C. Winn, of the committee that had proposed "A Declaration of Faith" for the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) in 1976, spoke to the Special Committee. Each recommended processes and warned of pitfalls suggested by their experience.

In February 1985, in an Atlanta hotel, the Special Committee to Prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith met to consider its direction. "A Brief Statement of Belief," adopted by the PCUS in 1962, was studied and the committee heard from the chair of a UPCUSA Task Force on the Confessional Nature of the Church. The committee then considered papers written by several of its own members on the nature of the confessional task. The thrust of a paper by George Kehm seemed to summarize the emerging sense of the group. In "Reunion as an Occasion for a New Confession of Faith," Kehm suggested that the issue was not whether a confession was necessary at this time, but whether it might be desirable and possible. It could provide a visible expression of the church's unity, enhance mutual trust among its members, and provide the church with a needed theological identity. The committee, which had been struggling over whether there was a critical, historical moment that demanded the writing of a statement of faith, now began to focus on the possible benefits to the church of writing a brief statement of faith at this time.

In May, at Princeton Seminary, the committee studied the Barmen Declaration. This process continued through

subsequent meetings so that the committee each time, in addition to worship, joined in study of one of the existing documents in *The Book of Confessions*. The committee co-opted as its recording secretary for that meeting Dr. Elizabeth Meirs, a retired professor of religion, who took shorthand notes. In May 1986, she became the committee's permanent recording secretary.

An impassioned plea from a New Mexico minister was entertained that requested the committee to endorse, for adoption by the General Assembly, "A Declaration of Faith," the 1976 PCUS document that had failed to receive the three-fourths vote in the presbyteries that would have given it confessional status. The Special Committee responded diversely to the merits of the Declaration, but agreed that the task of this committee was to draw up a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith and not to deal with the Declaration. It noted that the 117th General Assembly of the PCUS had commended it for use in the churches, but without confessional status. (Action by the 198th General Assembly [1986] lodged with the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit the responsibility to initiate procedures for including "A Declaration of Faith" in *The Book of Confessions* after the church has acted upon the Brief Statement of Faith.) Each member of the committee then presented his or her own three-page paper on "The Present as a Confessional Situation."

Discussion of the contemporary confessional situation continued during the next meeting at the John XXIII Retreat Center in Charleston, West Virginia. A process was begun that included meeting prior to the committee session with representatives of the local presbytery to hear their views. A second set of papers, written by each member of the committee, was discussed in small groups. This time the focus was on the "Style, Content, and Context of a Confession." Now, in October of 1985, about one year after the first substantive meeting, the group began to make some formative decisions. The

apostolic benediction (2 Cor. 13:14) was urged as a possible framework, and the group agreed to try it.

The committee also decided to work toward two documents: a very short one for use in worship, modeled on the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, and a longer document to be used for teaching in the church. Passionate voices were raised as to the critical societal problems that face the church. Some argued that it was possible that the annihilation of God's whole creation could take place in the lifetime of those now living. Others asserted that society was committed to the worship of various idols which negated a genuine commitment to the sovereignty of God. No agreement as to an overarching theme was reached. It was agreed that contextual issues could not be addressed in the short liturgical text, but should be linked to the longer teaching document. Regional writing groups were formed to begin work on a potential draft. And, a timetable was approved that would lead to final adoption of a text by the 1990 General Assembly, which could then send it to the presbyteries for their vote.

It was noted that several other groups currently meeting also were doing tasks that would affect the theological posture of the church. Accordingly, it was resolved to ask the Stated Clerk of the denomination to convene a meeting of the chairs of such groups for an exchange of information. A meeting of representatives from eight groups was subsequently held. Several were preparing new materials for use in worship: a Directory for Worship; liturgical resources; and the hymnal. Others were engaged in studies of the confessional nature of the church, the nature of revelation, and theological pluralism. Finally, in addition to the Special Committee to Prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith, there was the effort to produce a new Reformed educational curriculum for use in church schools. With no preconditioning from the Brief Statement Committee, when

asked what they saw as their central task, the other groups replied that it was an effort to create a new Presbyterian identity.

### *Difficulty in Developing a Draft*

In February 1986, at a retreat center in St. Louis, Missouri, the Special Committee reaffirmed its stance that no co-opted members, or official observers from other bodies, would be permitted. Members of the committee were assigned to meet with diverse constituencies in the church. An invitation was accepted to send some representatives to a consultation in Europe of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Representatives of special interest groups in the church met committee members prior to the St. Louis meeting along with presbytery representatives, a pattern that continued.

The committee wrestled with the results of the four regional writing groups. Each draft seemed to have the same two things wrong: it was too long, and it left out something that some members considered essential. Someone commented that there was a continual tension between the concerns of the "puritans" and the "poets" in the group. The puritans were characterized as those seeking theological precision of statement. The poets wanted the draft to be evocative of emotion and reflection, to sing and to engage people's commitment. All members were invited to present individual drafts prior to the next meeting and to produce a list of issues that could be dealt with under the rubric of the apostolic benediction.

In a May 1986 meeting at a dormitory of the University of Denver, four groups met, each to consider an outline of the content and suggest which of several drafts they preferred. In the plenary which followed, the view was expressed that the committee should not eliminate the use of "Father" as a designation for God. Some argued that "Creator" was not an acceptable substitute for "Father."



Heated discussion ensued. The next morning, the women on the committee caucused over breakfast. They then proposed that there be prepared presentations on the question of language about God at the October meeting of the committee. Later, a detailed outline for a draft was developed and Stotts announced that a drafting committee would be named.

In October 1986, the committee convened at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. A drafting committee had worked over the preceding weekend to prepare something for the whole group to consider. The first morning and early afternoon were given to discussion of the language-about-God issue. No resolution of the varying perspectives seemed in sight. Four committees dealt with the work of the drafting committee. Searching discussion brought no consensus. The St. Louis draft, as revised by the drafting committee, was deemed unsuitable as a basis for further revision. The Denver outline of issues was abandoned as too extensive and complex. Stotts wondered if the committee was at a crisis point.

Someone suggested a strategy to break the impasse: Let one person write a draft. The group thought that was a good idea and appointed someone for the task.

After debate, the committee reaffirmed and clarified its commitment to confidentiality. Working drafts were not to be shared with anyone outside the committee. A motion was passed reaffirming the commitment to write a catechetical document for joint confessional status with the liturgical document. An outline of the proposed catechetical document was prepared and assignments for sections to be written were made.

On February 12, 1987, the committee met at a retreat center in Burlingame, California. The major task was to decide if the individually prepared draft was acceptable as a basis on which to work. The committee was gratified with the draft as an attempt to synthesize the work of the committee as a whole.

The committee debated whether there should and could be a thematic focus for the draft. None was yet discernible. The issue of "Father" language continued to be raised as a point of contention. Three subcommittees were appointed to review the present draft. Each was to send its revisions to all on the committee before May. Question-and-answer material for the so-called catechism was sorted and assigned.

### *The Presbyterian Process Invoked*

At Santa Fe, New Mexico, in May 1987, the three subcommittees appointed to deal with the current text came up with eight alternative drafts. At this point, the Presbyterian process of majority vote was invoked as the appropriate way to proceed. Votes brought the number of drafts down to three, and then finally to revised draft seven, as the working text for the committee. The chair then appointed a drafting committee that worked unsuccessfully to agree on a further revision of draft seven before the Santa Fe meeting concluded. Other members of the committee worked on the catechetical document. Work done on the catechism was presented, and it was noted that it could not go forward until a definitive draft of the liturgical document was fixed. The Santa Fe meeting ended inconclusively with work on neither document satisfactorily resolved.

Stotts asked those members of the committee who would be at the General Assembly in Biloxi, Mississippi, to meet for a day to consider the draft. Some progress was made in Biloxi. Stotts then appointed a small drafting committee to meet on August 15 in San Antonio, Texas. That group worked again on refining the text. The whole committee convened on Sunday, August 16, 1987, at Mo Ranch, a Presbyterian conference center in Hunt, Texas, some sixty miles north of San Antonio. Outside their air-conditioned rooms, the weather was unrelentingly hot. In

this secluded setting, the committee had committed itself to spend a full week together to attempt to finalize the document.

When the whole committee convened, it was presented with a series of drafts prepared since the inconclusive Santa Fe meeting. The current text had now evolved through a Biloxi draft and a San Antonio draft. Stotts appointed an editing committee that attempted each day to recast the current draft in light of the intensive discussion in plenary. The days were long, sometimes twelve to fourteen hours, especially for the members of the editing team.

The use of the apostolic benediction as a framework was reargued, but affirmed. The committee still was perplexed as to a main theme for the document. Was it providence, or the danger of idolatry, or something else? Grammar was debated. Which were more effective, active verbs or participles?

It became clear that no agreement on the document as a whole would be possible until the issue of gender language about God could be resolved. A suggestion to insert the word "Abba" before "Father" was discussed extensively. The role of the Gloria at the end of the document became a matter of debate. Gradually, the rudiments of a compromise began to appear. On the one hand, female as well as male images of God were used: "Like a mother . . . like a father." Jesus' reference to God as "Abba, Father" was intended to show that "Father" did not refer to a punitive patriarch but a loving parent whom one could address with intimacy. The traditional Gloria, with its Father, Son, and Holy Spirit language was retained as a conclusion.

The committee laboriously worked through its current draft. Each line, sometimes each word, was examined. Motions were made, discussed, and voted on. After several hours of work in plenary, the drafting committee would produce a new text reflecting the decisions made.

Finally, on Thursday morning at 10:15 A.M. the committee unanimously adopted a draft named Mo Ranch 3, subject to further editorial work.

### ***Critical Decisions***

The Special Committee met October 8–10, 1987, in Atlanta at a hotel near the airport. Decisions were to be made in three critical areas. First, the text of the short liturgical document needed to be finalized. Second, the matter of the suspended catechetical or educational document needed to be revisited. Finally, a process for consultation with the church had to be devised.

A stylistic editing committee appointed by Stotts had previously met in New York City at the Interchurch Center on September 4 and a conference telephone call followed on September 21. The editing committee's revision of the Mo Ranch 3 draft was presented as the Riverside Draft. The Brief Statement Committee in plenary began to work through the draft beginning with an affirmation of the life/death theme in line one. Line-by-line review was followed by motions made, debated, and won or lost. Discussion continued through the afternoon, and after a break for dinner, on into the evening, at which time the introduction and first section of the draft seemed to be finished.

On Friday morning, the committee considered a timetable for its work, extending to a final report to the General Assembly of 1990. Included in the scenario were plans for development of a response form by which reaction to the draft could be received from members of the church. Publication of the Brief Statement in January 1988 in *Presbyterian Survey* and other journals was also authorized. Completion of a revised form of the Brief Statement was envisioned for October 1988, with preparation of a catechetical document to take place during the following year. Both the shorter and longer

documents could then be included in the final presentation to the 1990 General Assembly. The committee then turned to the second section of the draft and worked on it until satisfied. Then the issue of the suspended second or catechetical document was raised. Stotts reminded the committee of the vote taken in Louisville in October 1986 mandating two documents, a liturgical and a catechetical, to be submitted for joint confessional status.

For an hour, committee discussion ranged widely over issues raised by the second document. Members generally agreed on the value of an educational document for use in the church. Jane Dempsey Douglass, who had early on been appointed by Stotts as vice-moderator of the committee, pointed out that the liturgical document did not deal with certain important issues before the church. For example, she noted that, presently, neither it nor any document in *The Book of Confessions* gave a theological rationale for the practice of ordaining women. She felt a question-and-answer document could speak to that and also elaborate on the use of God-language.

The discussion then shifted to the question of the confessional standing of a catechetical document. Various members asked whether the committee had time and energy to produce a quality document; whether an official interpretation of the liturgical document would in effect be "binding the conscience" of church members; whether the committee's mandate included an extended educational document; and other considerations. Finally, to test the committee's sentiment, someone moved that the committee present to the church, for confessional status only, the short liturgical document as the Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith. The implications of this for the committee's previous action, for its just adopted time line, and the possibility that the production of a more extensive document could disrupt the delicate web of compromises that formed the short liturgical statement were all discussed.

The motion passed, and the committee adjourned for lunch.

After lunch, the committee discussed the time line and developed a plan for preparing a response form to go out to the church with the Brief Statement. Despite the eagerness of many to share the document, it was agreed that there would be no discussion of it until it was officially mailed to the churches by the Stated Clerk and released to *Presbyterian Survey* and the news service, presumably in January. The committee then resumed work on the final section of the draft of the Brief Statement.

Before the dinner recess, Douglass asked permission to make a personal statement. She focused on the action taken to rescind the mandate to produce a second, catechetical document for confessional status. She stressed that she, and others, had concurred with some of the decisions made regarding the short, liturgical document only because they believed that there would be a longer document that explained them. Especially problematical was that most of the material of particular concern to women was slated for the catechetical document which now would not be produced. After dinner and further discussion of the draft, the committee adjourned at 8:30 P.M.

On Saturday morning, work resumed on the draft. Discussion centered on the fact that women enrolled in seminary were often told by men that women do not have a valid call to ministry, and that the only explicit statements presently in *The Book of Confessions* spoke against the practice of ordaining women. After much discussion and many amendments, a line was inserted reading, "and calls both women and men to all the ministries of the church" (line 50, 1988 draft version). By mid-morning, after further amendments, the text of the Brief Statement was unanimously approved. The committee then spontaneously rose and sang the Gloria. After two additional grammatical changes, Stotts ruled that the time for further changes in wording had passed.

The committee then rescinded its action of the previous day to abandon a second catechetical document for confessional status. It was agreed that in February 1988, at the committee's next meeting, the first item on the agenda would be discussion of the nature and standing of any further document the committee might prepare. Stotts was given permission to include in his General Assembly report, due in January, a request that the Assembly allow the committee to bring forward documents of a nonconfessional nature to accompany its final report.

The committee met February 11-13, 1988, at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Members from colder climes greeted the warm weather and green grass with delight. The mood of the committee seemed to match the context. It was upbeat and hopeful. After four months of reflection, the committee again rescinded its commitment to two documents for confessional status. It was then decided to prepare a nonconfessional study guide keyed to the Bible and *The Book of Confessions*, and to write a preamble. Visits by committee members to member theological institutions of the Committee on Theological Education were planned. Plans for release of the Brief Statement to the church, the news media, and ecumenical partners were discussed. The meeting concluded with excitement concerning the presentation of a text to the church and the possible response. The text was subsequently mailed to all ministers and clerks of session, accompanied by a questionnaire that could be tabulated by the computers of the Research Services division of the Stewardship and Communication Development Ministry Unit of the General Assembly.

### ***Response by the Church***

An interim report was made to the St. Louis General Assembly in June and hearings were held. During the spring and summer of 1988, more than 15,000 response

forms flooded into Louisville. Stotts engaged recording secretary Elizabeth Meirs to analyze the additional 1,760 detailed responses that had come in. Each member of the Special Committee read a 5 percent share of them and Stotts read them all. Excitement was building for the committee to hear the full scope of the church's response.

The committee convened September 1, 1988, at an airport hotel in Denver. In worship, the committee heard a taped performance of the 1988 text of the Brief Statement written as a choir anthem by a church musician in Bowling Green, Kentucky. The committee heard a report from the Churchwide Gathering of Women at Purdue in July. The women had very much favored the use of feminine imagery in the Brief Statement and had divided regarding the Gloria, with a majority favoring it.

Art Benjamin, associate director of Research Services, reported on his analysis of more than 15,000 computer-form responses. Because of the move from New York to Louisville, and a loss of staff, his computer operation had been slowed. He had, however, processed over 10,000 forms and had seen a steady pattern after the first 1,200.

Benjamin noted that the respondents were predominantly office bearers, 48 percent being ministers of the Word and Sacrament and 35 percent being elders. Almost two thirds of the group responses were from sessions. A disproportionately higher representation came from larger congregations. (The majority of members are in congregations of 400 or more even though about one third of all Presbyterian churches have less than 100 members.) The racial mix of 94 percent Anglo was quite close to the picture for Presbyterians generally.

Benjamin stated that 88 percent of the respondents agreed with the proposition that the Brief Statement affirmed beliefs characteristic of our Presbyterian tradition. That, he felt, was the highest rating anything has gotten since reunion. When asked about the balance between traditional and contemporary language in the



statement, 72 percent said there was a good balance. Another 17 percent said the language was too contemporary, and 8 percent said it was too traditional. Asked about its length for use in worship, 35 percent said it was about right, while 61 percent said it was too long, and only 2 percent felt it was too short. Eighty-one percent of the respondents liked the theological content, with only 16 percent disliking it. In addition to the statistical data, the committee received an analysis of the substance of the extended comments from Meirs.

The committee also reviewed responses from three ecumenical partners: the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches; the Office for Ecumenical Affairs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; and the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Each of the groups expressed appreciation for the opportunity to respond. All tended to offer faint praise of the document. The Roman Catholic Bishops' Committee was particularly sharp in its criticism. The bishops felt that God the Father "is not sufficiently warm in this text." They accused the document of presenting an Arian Christology, in which Jesus Christ was not presented as "true God and true man co-equal with the Father." And finally, they regretted what appeared to them to be a pre-emptive "last word" on the role of women in the church. They concluded: "At the present stage of its development we would not see the Brief Statement as yet suitable for use as a baptismal or eucharistic creed."

Members of the Special Committee to Prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith then proceeded to review the text that had been critiqued by the church. They noted criticisms and suggested alternatives, but refrained from making any decisions at that time. Three things became clear. First, the text had massive support in the denomination. There was no need for the committee to start over, but only to fine-tune what it had previously

written. Second, the criticisms invariably moved in more than one direction. It was not possible, even if the committee had desired it, to change the document just to please people. Any change that pleased one group would displease another. The committee realized that its task in making changes was to clarify the places where it felt that its intent had been misunderstood. For example, no one on the committee was promoting an Arian Christology. If the Roman Catholic bishops, and others, could not recognize an orthodox view of the person of Christ without the use of the language of the ancient creeds, then the committee decided it would need to use the language of the Nicene Creed in its statement about Christ. Finally, since this text had received such overwhelming approval, the committee felt that changes should be kept to a minimum.

Certain sensitive issues remained unresolved. Stotts commented that the pivotal point was the question of language about God. On the other hand, Andrew Kim, a Korean-American pastor on the committee, stated that for Koreans, God-language was no problem. The feminine language used for God had been attacked by some feminists as stereotyping women in a maternal role as "like a mother." Women on the committee noted that the stereotyping was apparent but that the biblical reference from Isaiah 49:15 was the most vivid biblical female image for God.

All of the suggestions were duly noted. Each member was invited to submit a revised draft of the Brief Statement. Stotts would then appoint a small committee to prepare a last working draft for the next meeting. At that time, final decisions on the text would be made.

### *Final Decisions on the Text*

The Special Committee met December 1-3, 1988, at a hotel in San Antonio, Texas. Stotts led the committee

into its final, decisive editing task. A drafting committee had met in Chicago in early November to prepare the text for this meeting.

The committee marched through the draft, word by word and line by line. When they came to line 25 (1989 draft version), "whom Jesus called Abba, Father," Stotts suggested limiting discussion to fifteen minutes or less since that ground had been so thoroughly covered. There was no discussion of the line. Seconds later, a motion was made and passed to retain the line as it stood. It was clear that the committee understood that some of the compromises on which it had agreed could not be reopened without the potential of destroying the delicate unity that now held the document and the committee together.

On Saturday morning, December 3, the committee arrived at the last line of the text, "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen." The Gloria, line 68 of the 1989 draft version, became a sticking point on which all of the previous sensitivities now seemed to center. That line had been accepted as a link to the ecumenical Christian tradition in the 1988 draft. In responses to that draft from the church, however, the Gloria had been cited as a problem by a significant minority. The committee engaged in a strenuous, probing discussion for nearly two hours. The hard-won unanimity of the committee was subjected to intense pressure right up to the final moment. After examining the matter from multiple perspectives, a compromise was reached with the decision to retain line 68 with an asterisk and footnote reading: "\*Instead of saying this line, congregations may wish to sing a version of the Gloria." Then the final section of the text was adopted as a whole.

Stotts noted that the entire text as amended had now been passed, with one exception. The only substantive issue yet to be decided was the question of whether and where to insert the phrase "Holy One of Israel." It was agreed to hold that over until the January meeting of

the committee, when the entire amended text would be reviewed. The matter of the title for the document was also discussed but left unresolved. Jorge Lara-Braud and Andrew Kim were asked to prepare Spanish and Korean versions of the text, as they had of the earlier 1988 draft. It was agreed that the English text would be the basis for debate at the General Assembly. A proposal for a book of essays about the Brief Statement was also under consideration. The committee adjourned until January.

### *What to Call It?*

On January 5, 1989, the committee met at a hotel near the San Francisco airport. After lengthy debate, the committee found that it could not agree on an appropriate place to insert the phrase "Holy One of Israel," and it was left out of the text. Further discussion centered on what were considered stylistic changes. The Preface was discussed and a motion to restore a reference to Chapter II of the Form of Government, in *The Book of Order*, passed. The Preface was voted to accompany the Brief Statement. Additionally, cross-references to Scripture and *The Book of Confessions*, prepared by Clarice Martin and David Willis-Watkins, were to be appended, but like the Preface they were to have no confessional authority.

The question of the title was debated extensively. It was referred to a subcommittee that returned with a report that was not accepted. The principal concerns focused on the words "Reformed" and "Brief." Some felt that people in the Reformed tradition tried only to state the universal Christian faith in their confessions. To identify those confessions as "Reformed" seemed to them somehow arrogant. Others argued that while trying to state the Christian faith succinctly, each group that did so gave it a distinctive cast from their own perspective. Accordingly, it was felt that this committee should take responsibility for identifying the particular tradition

from which it had worked. Similarly, the word "Brief" elicited opposite reactions. Some, who had worked hard to limit the length of the document, felt that it was no longer legitimate to call it brief. Others argued that it was brief, relative to most other confessions, and that the word carried a continuity with the original mandate. In the end, "Brief" was retained, the word "Reformed" was dropped, but the source, "Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)," was added.

Plans were made for the coming General Assembly, at which the Brief Statement would be submitted for official reception. The process of preparing a study guide for use in the presbyteries after the 1990 General Assembly was initiated. An editorial committee was established to pursue the notion of a book of scholarly essays on the Brief Statement. (This appeared in the spring of 1990 as *To Confess the Faith Today*, edited by Jack L. Stotts and Jane Dempsey Douglass, published by Westminster/John Knox Press. The essays treat issues raised in the attempt to articulate a contemporary confession of faith.)

### ***The Constitutional Process***

The constitutional process for adopting a new confession of faith in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), as described in *The Book of Order* (G-18.0200), required adoption by a General Assembly, review and possible revision by a committee of no less than fifteen elders and ministers, acceptance by a second General Assembly, the affirmative vote of two thirds of the presbyteries, and confirmation by a third General Assembly. After five years of work together, and the extra process of informal submission of the text to the church and subsequent revision, the Special Committee to Prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith was ready to make its official report.

A presentation was made to the 1989 Assembly. Stotts began with the words: "There is a gravity to this matter

that sets it apart from all the rest of the important business that you conduct." Douglass described the committee's process, and then committee members spoke of their appreciation for the Brief Statement: Joanna Adams as a pastor, John Leith as a professor, and Ann Weems as a layperson. Ed Newberry led the commissioners in reading the Brief Statement.

An Assembly Committee of sixty-nine commissioners and advisory delegates received the Brief Statement as their only business for two days. James Andrews, the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, oriented them to their task. They had no power to change the Special Committee's document, nor did the Assembly in plenary session, but the Assembly Committee could suggest amendments that the Assembly could choose to pass on to the revision committee which was to be appointed. The Stated Clerk went on to comment that this was a rare opportunity in the life of the denomination. "If you can encourage the church to spend a solid year in theological reflection," he said, "it will be a great contribution to renewal." The Assembly Committee invited several members of the Brief Statement Committee to explain their process and interpret the document. The Assembly Committee also heard testimony from persons who had come to speak about the Brief Statement. Then the Assembly Committee moved through the document line by line, debated, and made motions for suggested revisions. Thirty motions for change were made. Only three passed. One was a reordering of a line, and another a slight rewording.

On the floor of the Assembly, only the third and substantive motion was debated. The Assembly Committee recommended that line 35 of the 1989 draft document, "We deserve God's judgment," be changed back to the wording of the 1988 draft, "We deserve God's condemnation." Debate on the floor lasted only thirteen minutes. The Assembly accepted its committee's recommenda-

tions and passed the whole document unanimously. Members of the Special Committee were left in a state of happy shock. They had been prepared to respond to criticisms on the floor, but no response was required. They left the Assembly with natural anxiety and hopeful anticipation as they waited to hear who had been appointed to the Committee of Fifteen, and how and when they would be called upon to consult with it.

### *The Committee of Fifteen*

Joan SalmonCampbell, the newly elected Moderator of the 1989 General Assembly, appointed sixteen persons who were nonetheless called the Committee of Fifteen. She later said that she had appointed "practitioners" who she hoped would prepare a "user-friendly" revision of the Brief Statement. Ten of the sixteen were ministers. Three were laypersons and only three were professors. The Committee of Fifteen met for the first time on November 1, 1989, in Louisville, Kentucky. After a day of orientation, they listened to members of the Special Committee to Prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith who had been invited to explain their rationale for the document as it was. The Committee of Fifteen then met for another day on its own and planned the schedule for their work. They listed fifty-eight items of concern that they felt needed to be addressed. Upon review, about half were kept on a list for further discussion in December.

The Committee of Fifteen met December 13-16, 1989, at the Briarwood Conference Center near Dallas, Texas. The chair, William F. Skinner, had been a candidate for moderator of the General Assembly just passed. His father, Sherman Skinner, had chaired the Committee of Fifteen that revised the Confession of 1967. The committee elected Paul Leggett as vice-moderator. He had been a member of the Assembly Committee at the 1989

Assembly and had participated in the floor debate on the matter of "condemnation" versus "judgment."

Emotions ran high as the Committee of Fifteen dealt very seriously with the text and with one another. As they proceeded, the committee felt that they had "unmasked the idol of parsimony" and added approximately 25 percent to the total length of the document. At the same time, they decided that they could not hope to get passage of their version of the Brief Statement without the concurrence of the members of the original drafting committee, the Special Committee to Prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith.

The two committees met together in January 1990. The atmosphere was tense. The Special Committee had worked for five years, and the Committee of Fifteen had worked intensively for five months. Each had a mandate from the General Assembly, and each had taken it seriously. Their differences extended beyond the matter of length to questions of content. Over several days, they discussed together, caucused separately, made motions, and debated them. Some of the material added by the Committee of Fifteen was omitted, some material was revised, and much that was added was accepted and affirmed. In the end, all present felt that the final product was better than either committee had expected. Both groups voted unanimously for the text that was to go to the General Assembly.

At the General Assembly in Salt Lake City in June 1990, members of both the Special Committee and the Committee of Fifteen were present as resource persons to the Assembly Committee. This time the Assembly Committee had the power to suggest actual changes to the full Assembly. For a whole day they worked through the document, line by line, sometimes word by word. Numerous motions for change were made. As the day went on, the voting margins became more narrow, but in the end each motion for change was defeated. The Brief



Statement was sent to the floor unamended and with the recommendation of the two writing committees and the Assembly Committee.

Members of the Committee of Fifteen, Paul Leggett, Deborah Douglas, Harry Hassall, Cynthia Campbell, and Leon Fanniel, made presentations to the Assembly that summarized the content of the Brief Statement. When debate was opened on the floor, three one-word amendments were suggested. In each case, a member of one of the two writing committees was prepared to explain the rationale for the choice of words. A member of the Assembly Committee took the microphone to state that she had come believing that significant changes needed to be made in the document. After listening to the debate in the Assembly Committee, and after hearing from the representatives of the two prior committees, she became convinced that the document had received extensive and adequate treatment. The next speaker moved that debate be closed. The commissioners to the General Assembly voted by a 94 percent majority to approve "A Brief Statement of Faith: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)," and send it to the presbyteries for their vote. It was an eight-year process from the mandate for Moderator Taylor to appoint a committee, to the vote by the presbyteries, to the 1991 General Assembly. Presbyterians in the late twentieth century took the process of articulating their corporate theological identity very seriously.

## **The Special Committee to Prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith**

Joanna M. Adams, Decatur, Ga.

Juventino R. Ballesteros,  
Savannah, Ga.

James D. Brown,  
Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif.

Jane Dempsey Douglass,  
Princeton, N.J.

Roland M. Frye,  
Strafford, Wayne, Pa.

Brian A. Gerrish, Chicago, Ill.

M. Douglas Harper, Jr.,  
Houston, Tex.

George H. Kehm, Pittsburgh, Pa.

T. Andrew Kim, Southfield, Mich.

Jorge Lara-Braud, Austin, Tex.

John H. Leith, Richmond, Va.

Clarice J. Martin, Princeton, N.J.

Edward B. Newberry,  
Charlotte, N.C.

William C. Placher,  
Crawfordsville, Ind.

Nancy J. Ramsay, Louisville, Ky.

Jack B. Rogers, Pasadena, Calif.

Jack L. Stotts, Austin, Tex.

George W. Stroup III,  
Decatur, Ga.

Ann B. Weems, St. Louis, Mo.

E. David Willis-Watkins,  
Princeton, N.J.

Antoinette Clark Wire,  
Berkeley, Calif.

## **Other Members Originally Appointed to the Committee**

Katie G. Cannon (resigned)

John Danhof (deceased)

Kathleen M. Jimenez (resigned)

## **The Committee of Fifteen**

Elizabeth B. Andrews,  
Lake Forest, Ill.

Harold A. Bair,  
Philadelphia, Pa.

Cynthia M. Campbell,  
Salina, Kans.

Deborah Douglas, Santa Fe, N.M.

Susan Nelson Dunfee,  
Pittsburgh, Pa.

Leon E. Fanniel,  
Los Angeles, Calif.

Henry E. Fawcett,  
Dubuque, Iowa

Eugenia Gamble, Englewood, Calif.

Harry S. Hassall, Dallas, Tex.

William F. Keesecker,  
Overland Park, Kans.

Paul A. Leggett, Montclair, N.J.

Jack E. McClendon,  
Washington, D.C.

Robert C. Rovell,  
New Smyrna Beach, Fla.

Byron E. Shafer, Yonkers, N.Y.

William F. Skinner,  
Sioux City, Iowa

S. E. (Skip) Viau, Seattle, Wash.

## Essential Tenets of the Reformed Faith

What are the basics of the faith according to A Brief Statement of Faith? How well does it cohere with the central themes found in *The Book of Confessions*? Chapter II of the Form of Government, in *The Book of Order*, "The Church and Its Confessions," exemplifies the basics contained in *The Book of Confessions* by pointing to central aspects of the "Faith of the Church Catholic," the "Faith of the Protestant Tradition," and the "Faith of the Reformed Tradition." Ten themes derived from Chapter II may be considered characteristic of the common themes of *The Book of Confessions*. Each of these ten themes is articulated in contemporary form in A Brief Statement of Faith.

The temper and tone of A Brief Statement also shows a continuity with *The Book of Confessions*. A Brief Statement, in its style and content, especially shows the influence of the Heidelberg Catechism. The first line: "In life and in death we belong to God," is a deliberate echo of the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism. Q.1. "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" A. "That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ" (4.001). This statement of faith is a personal one. It is not an abstract theological assessment. It is a personal affirmation of the most deeply felt commitments of a person's life. A Brief Statement returns to that personal language of Heidelberg in its conclusion. Lines 78–79 declare: "We rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (1990 revised version).

## A Christian Statement

According to Chapter II of the Form of Government, in *The Book of Order*, two beliefs which mark the Presbyterian Church as catholic, universal, or generically

Christian are the mystery of the triune God, and the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ.

The 1990 revised version of A Brief Statement, in line 5, states: "We trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel." Presbyterians share with Israel of old that strong monotheism declared in Deuteronomy 6:4, "The Lord—and the Lord alone—is our God." No person, nation, ideology—nothing in the universe—deserves our ultimate allegiance, but God alone! So line 6 asserts of God, "whom alone we worship and serve."

Commitment to one God in three persons serves as the literary and theological framework for A Brief Statement. It begins in lines 2–4 with the apostolic benediction taken from 2 Corinthians 13:14: "Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit." Then each of the three major sections of the statement begins with "we trust." Line 7 says, "We trust in Jesus Christ." Lines 27–28 state, "We trust in God whom Jesus called Abba, Father." And line 52 stresses, "We trust in God the Holy Spirit." The clear intent of A Brief Statement of Faith is to affirm Presbyterian commonality with all Christians—Protestant, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox—who trust in one triune God.

Presbyterians share also with all Christians the conviction that we are not alone. God has come to be one of us for our salvation. We believe in the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ. A Brief Statement in lines 7–8 affirms, "We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God." Here the language of Nicene orthodoxy replaced a more poetic 1988 draft, "God with us in human flesh." Among others, a response of the Roman Catholic Bishops' Committee to the 1988 version accused it of Arianism, a failure to affirm the full deity of Christ. Since this was never the intent of the committee, it reverted to the more traditional language of the ancient creed so that it would not be misunderstood.

A Brief Statement announces in line 20 that "Jesus was crucified," and in line 23 affirms that "God raised this Jesus from the dead." In line 26 the happy consequence of this is confessed: "delivering us from death to life eternal." Line 23 is a direct reference to Acts 2:32, where the adjective "this" preceding "Jesus" makes clear that it is the same Jesus who died who was raised from the dead. This specificity makes clear A Brief Statement's commitment to a truly divine and human Savior who died and was raised for our salvation.

### ***A Protestant Statement***

A Brief Statement not only expresses the faith of the church catholic, but it embraces the faith of the Protestant Reformation. Two of the central principles of that renewal of the church in the sixteenth century are justification by grace through faith and the authority of Scripture. A Brief Statement of Faith affirms both.

One of the most frequently lamented lacks in the 1988 and 1989 drafts of A Brief Statement of Faith was the absence of an explicit statement on justification. The original drafting committee felt that the principle of grace was implicit throughout the document. Members of the Committee of Fifteen felt it necessary to make the implicit explicit. Thus, line 54 now reads, "The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith." The placement and particular wording of this statement on justification occasioned much theological discussion when the original drafting committee (then dubbed the Committee of Twenty-one) was invited to consult with the Committee of Fifteen after its revisions were made. In the end, the Calvinistic correctness of the insertion was affirmed with references to the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XIII (*Book of Confessions*, 6.071) and Book III of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, where justification is dealt with in the context of the Spirit's work.

Lines 58–61 contain a commentary on the function of Scripture. Careful examination of these lines reveals conscious reference by the committee to views of Scripture contained in three earlier confessions. After invoking “The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles,” A Brief Statement uses the language of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “rules our faith and life” (*Book of Confessions*, 7.002 and 7.040). This is joined to the emphasis of the Theological Declaration of Barmen (8.11) and the Confession of 1967 (9.27) on Christ as the one revelation of God to whom the Scriptures bear witness by saying, “in Christ through Scripture.” The section on Scripture concludes with a contemporary version of the affirmation in the Second Helvetic Confession that “The Preaching of the Word of God Is the Word of God” (5.004). Line 61 says that the Spirit “engages us through the Word proclaimed.” A Brief Statement of Faith explicitly evidences the two principal marks of the Protestant Reformation: justification by grace through faith, and the authority of Scripture.

### ***A Reformed Statement***

A Brief Statement of Faith also bears witness to the faith of the Reformed tradition. For many Presbyterians the word “Reformed” is unfamiliar. The word “Presbyterian” refers to our form of government by elders (from the Greek, *presbyteros*). Few understand that we are identified not only by our Presbyterian form of government, but by our theological heritage as Reformed. When reformation of the church broke out in the sixteenth century, it developed indigenously in various areas. In Germany, the Protestant church was called Lutheran, in England it was Anglican, and, in the region we now call Switzerland, it was known as Reformed. The Reformed movement spread somewhat into Eastern Europe including Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and also up the Rhine

River valley through France into the Low Countries of Belgium and Holland and across the channel into the British Isles. Queen Elizabeth wrote in a letter to a friend that the Swiss were “more Reformed” than the Lutherans. None of the Protestant Reformers intended to be anything other than simply Christian. They did not wish to develop distinctive doctrines or practices. But, as each movement developed in a particular historical, cultural, and theological context, it acquired a distinctive character.

Chapter II of the Form of Government, in *The Book of Order*, embodies six themes or emphases that are characteristic of our Reformed theological heritage. A Brief Statement of Faith affirms each one. We are not the only Christians to hold these views. We did not invent them. But taken together, they give a sense of the characteristic emphases that have nurtured the Reformed movement in Protestantism.

God’s sovereignty is first among the Reformed emphases in Chapter II. A Brief Statement asserts in line 29, “In sovereign love God created the world good.” Second, the election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation is evoked by reference to the biblical context. Lines 41–43 aver, “In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose [elected] a covenant people to bless all families of the earth.” Third, having chosen a people, God made a covenant with them. Lines 47–48 rejoice that “God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.” That connects with the emphasis in Chapter II of the Form of Government on the covenant life of the church. The fourth emphasis is on a faithful stewardship of God’s creation. A Brief Statement of Faith sounds a warning in lines 37–38 that we “exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.” Fifth to be stated in *The Book of Order* is a recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which is sin. In line 69, A Brief Statement declares that

the Spirit gives us courage, "to unmask idolatries in church and culture." In response to the recognition of sin, the sixth emphasis in Chapter II "calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God." In similar language, A Brief Statement, in line 71, exhorts us "to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace."

The writers of A Brief Statement of Faith set out to summarize the basics of the faith that Presbyterians share with all Christians, with all Protestants, and with those in our Reformed family. That is all the drafters committed themselves to do, but they did more. In the process of restating the Reformed tradition in contemporary language, they were impelled to extend that tradition into new areas.

### **Contemporary Relevance**

A Brief Statement of Faith brings the biblical witness to bear in some areas not as clearly addressed by other documents in *The Book of Confessions*. A fresh look at the Word of God under the leading of the Spirit produced new emphases and, in some cases, offered new alternatives to historically and culturally limited perspectives in previous confessional documents. The original drafting committee contributed new confessional emphases regarding Jesus Christ, regarding us, and regarding God.

### ***Jesus Christ's Life and Ministry***

A Brief Statement of Faith is the first creed to include a narrative of Jesus Christ's life and ministry. The Confession of 1967 points in that direction (*Book of Confessions*, 9.08). But the older confessional documents tell of Christ's birth and then skip immediately to his death. The reason is clear. The events of birth, death, and resurrection are the prime facts which relate to our salvation.



Luther's question that motivated the Reformation was, "Where may I find a gracious God?" The question voiced in our cities today is, "Where can I find a gracious neighbor?" A Brief Statement of Faith points to Jesus Christ as neighbor to those who have none and calls us to that ministry as well. Lines 9–18 begin with "Gospel" verbs that underline Jesus' activity on earth as he proclaimed the reign of God. Preaching, teaching, blessing, healing, binding up, eating with, forgiving, and calling all are descriptions of a ministry of grace for the good of all.

### *Human Equality*

A Brief Statement of Faith also tells us something significant about ourselves. Lines 30–32 announce that God "makes everyone equally in God's image." At the most fundamental level of their being, male and female are equal. All races and peoples are equal. And we are called "to live as one community." The drafters were saying confessionally that there is no master race; there is no superior gender. Line 64 applies this principle quite specifically by saying that the Spirit "calls women and men to all ministries of the church." The Confession of 1967 had affirmed the equality of all races. Unfortunately, that confessional commitment needs to be reasserted with vigor. A Brief Statement of Faith, for the first time confessionally, applies the equality of persons specifically to women. This was necessary to correct the historically limited perspectives of the Scots Confession and the Second Helvetic Confession, which teach that baptism should not be administered by women. In both cases, the context is a polemic against the Catholics who allowed nuns and midwives to baptize lest children dying unbaptized should go to hell, a view which the Protestant Reformers rejected (*Book of Confessions*, 3.22 and 5.191). Ironically, the contemporary Roman Catholic Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs reacted negatively

to line 64, saying that the role of women in the church is an issue that the bishops would prefer to leave open.

### ***Language About God***

A Brief Statement of Faith offers renewed insight into the biblical understanding of the nature of God and of our relationship to God. The language we use about God is one of the most difficult issues discussed in the church today. A Brief Statement does not offer a definitive solution to all of the problems. It does indicate where the church is in its wrestling with this issue and offers some positive ground on which Presbyterians may stand.

The good news is that Scripture affirms God as a person with whom we may have a personal relationship. The problem is that as human beings, the only kind of persons we know are male persons or female persons. But, God is not a man! God is not a woman, either. God, according to the prophet Hosea, is the Holy One! (Hos. 11:9). How are we to speak of this awesome One in personal terms?

Drafters of a Brief Statement took their model from Scripture and tried to speak of God as the biblical writers do. In line 49 they followed the lead of the prophet Isaiah (49:15–16) in saying, “Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child.” And in line 50 they cited the well-known passage from Luke 15:11–32, “like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home.” The point in each case is made clear in line 51, “God is faithful still.” We know that all human illustrations are but pointers to the reality of a personal God whose love exceeds every human limitation.

The writers of the Brief Statement thought it especially important to speak of God as Jesus did. So in lines 27–28 they speak of God, “whom Jesus called Abba, Father.” The biblical translators leave this Aramaic word “Abba” untranslated into English each of the three times it appears in the New Testament (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal.

4:6). In the contexts in which it appears, and in the language that Jesus actually spoke, it appears to be a word of familiarity and intimacy. Jesus is calling God something like "Daddy," or "Papa." When Jesus thus refers to his Father, it is not as a punitive patriarch, but as a warm and loving parent with whom he and we can have an intimate, personal relationship.

### *New Insights*

New ground was also broken by the Committee of Fifteen. The members of this revision committee were predominantly pastors and members who invoked biblical and practical criteria in their evaluation and revision of the draft they received. They added the phrases, "the Holy One of Israel," "blessing the children," "binding up the brokenhearted," "ignoring God's commandments," "in everlasting love," "the cup of salvation," "to pray without ceasing," "empowered by the Spirit," and others.

Contemporary theological insights that opened new avenues for exploration of the Reformed tradition were also added. In the section on sin in line 33, the Committee of Fifteen added to the traditional Augustinian formula, "we rebel against God." They reflected on the insight of some feminist theologians that what is the primary sin for women may be different from what it is for men. They thus offered, "we hide from our Creator." In the Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis 3, the man and the woman are both depicted as rebelling and hiding, so the insight was accepted by all.

The insights of contemporary psychology indicate that we can fail to accept ourselves, which can make it difficult for us genuinely to accept others as well. The revision committee, in line 55, added "sets us free to accept ourselves" along with "to love God and neighbor."

Sensitivity to the enormous ethnic and cultural diversity of people in the world and in our own nation and

church motivated two other additions. In line 68, which encourages us "to witness . . . to Christ as Lord and Savior," the phrase was added, "among all peoples." And a Native American member of the Committee of Fifteen, Henry Fawcett, successfully urged the inclusion of the line "to hear the voices of peoples long silenced." His hope, and that of the combined committees, was that the church would be more open to listen to and benefit from the insights and experiences of its racial ethnic members.

"A Brief Statement of Faith: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)," has responded to our need as a church to find the center, the core on which we can agree. It offers concrete evidence that there are concepts, commands, and commitments to which Presbyterians respond in common. A Brief Statement becomes, therefore, a baseline on which Presbyterians can build. It can serve both as a contemporary outline of the rich resources that *The Book of Confessions* affords and as a sign pointing toward new areas in which the Reformed tradition can continue to expand.

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